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R&D Chronicles: The Mosquito Fighters, Part VII - The Inimitable Dr. Stitt and the Navy Medical School

Released: 10/6/2016

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Navy Medical School Bacteriology Laboratory, 1908

"It is necessary that the medical officer of the Navy get a cosmopolitan idea of diseases. He goes into all the ports of the world and is called upon to examine and treat men who may have recently cruised in remote parts of the globe. He may serve at one time in a naval hospital in the tropics, at another as the medical officer of an expedition operating anywhere between the equator and the poles."

~Rear Adm. Edward Rhodes Stitt, MC, USN, Superintendent of Naval Medical School, 1916-1920

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In the first decades of the twentieth century, the U.S. Navy's armory against mosquito-borne and other tropical diseases was located in a former Observatory-turned schoolhouse in Washington, D.C., known as the Naval Medical School.

The Naval Medical School had existed in various incarnations throughout the nineteenth century with the underlying purpose of preparing newly commissioned medical officers for life on the high seas. Over the years the school's coursework evolved with the needs of the Navy; the early emphasis on clinical training and surgery gradually shifted towards the laboratory sciences and hygiene. When it was reestablished in Washington, D.C., in May 1902, the burgeoning fields of tropical medicine and laboratory technique became a chief focus of study.

During the school's 40 years in Washington, D.C. (1902-1942), no one was more responsible for the its new vision or its profound success than a slightly-built, bespectacled pharmacist-turned physician from the Carolinas named Edward Rhodes Stitt (1867-1948). In 1902, Rear Adm. Presley Rixey, the Navy's Surgeon General had specifically recruited Dr. Stitt to develop the school's curriculum, serve as its first professor of bacteriology, chemistry and tropical medicine, and oversee construction of laboratory facilities. Rixey, would later remark that Stitt's work in this role "was most fortunate."

Few could argue with Stitt's qualifications. A student of the legendary William Osler at University of Pennsylvania, friend and mentee of the Yellow Fever Commission's James Carroll, and tours of duty in Chile and Nicaragua where he took special interest in understanding endemic diseases. Stitt would later become one of the first Americans to study under Sir Patrick Munson at the legendary London School of Tropical Medicine and travel through Egypt, Guam, Hawaii, Japan and the Philippines studying vector-based diseases that would prove so-challenging for U.S. forces in the coming years.

During his tenures at the Navy Medical School, Stitt immersed students in diagnosis and prophylaxis of "quarantinable diseases"; he taught laboratory technique, microscopy, how to examine blood and specimens, and identify human parasites. He also recruited some of foremost experts on tropical medicine to give presentations on topics like transmission of disease by mosquitoes, medical zoology, sanitation and mosquito control measures, and etiology of Yellow Fever. Notable visiting professors included Leland Howard, Charles Stiles, Col. William Gorgas, Juan Guiteras, Milton Rosenau and the Yellow Fever Commission's James Carroll.

With the exception for the years of study abroad and duty as an executive/commanding officer at Naval Hospital Canacao, Philippines, Stitt would guide the school for over half of its first twenty years. After being appointed school superintendent in 1916, Stitt took a special interest in the role of preventive medicine and helped establish and prepare special mobile laboratory and sanitary units—forerunners of Navy epidemiology and preventive medicine units. In 1920, Stitt was awarded the Navy Cross for his role at the school in the fields of medical research, education and sanitation.

Perhaps his greatest legacies would be the publication of two textbooks, Practical Bacteriology, Blood Work and Animal Parasitology (1909) and The Diagnostics and Treatment of Tropical Diseases (1914). Inspired by his own teachings and travels, the books offered readers an intimate and comprehensive knowledge of disease epidemiology, prophylaxis and laboratory science. Stitt continually updated these books with the latest advances in medical science and they remained in print throughout his own lifetime. Even today they are considered classics in the field.

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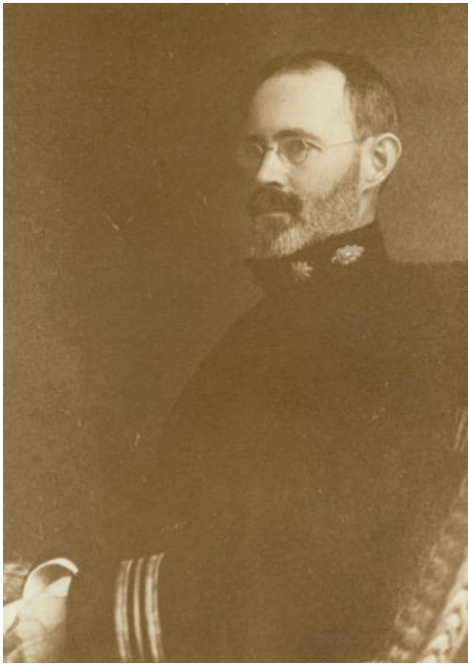
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U.S. Naval Medical School, Washington, D.C.



Dr. Stitt, ca. 1902

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